

ASIA'S POLARISING TRIANGLES: ASSESSING THE RISE OF THE RUSSIA–CHINA–NORTH KOREA AXIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR EAST ASIA, THE GLOBAL ORDER AND INDIA

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Introduction

In recent years, the foundation of global leadership and cooperation has visibly weakened. Ongoing conflicts such as the Israel–Gaza war, the Russia–Ukraine war, renewed hostilities between India and Pakistan, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and the growing threat of a Taiwan crisis underscore the declining strength of multilateral diplomacy. Nearly all these major flashpoints are located in or around Asia, reflecting the region's growing centrality in an increasingly fragmented and polarised international order.¹

Globalism to Regionalism—Why and who all are shifting towards regionalism?

Amid ongoing global turmoil, faith in multilateral institutions like the United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), and World Bank is steadily eroding, as these bodies struggle to maintain international peace, security, and uphold the global order.² Reflecting this sentiment, India's Prime Minister at the 17th BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) Summit called for visible reforms in several multilateral organisations.³ These recent developments highlight a growing shift towards realist strategies where states increasingly prioritise sovereignty, national interest, and hard power over collective cooperation. As a result, there is a marked turn towards regionalism, with countries aligning themselves with more flexible, geographically proximate blocs that cater better to their immediate strategic interests.⁴ This shift is evident in the growing relevance and expansion of regional groupings like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in the Indo-Pacific, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Southeast Asia, and institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which promote cooperation across security, economic, and political spheres.

Regionalism Leading to Polarisation

However, other than promoting regional integration, this trend has also intensified polarisation—especially within subcontinental areas—as rival states consolidate influence through competing frameworks, economic corridors, and defence partnerships.⁵ One of the clearest examples of this regional polarisation can be seen in East Asia, where historical grievances and strategic rivalries have produced a complex and volatile security environment. The region faces a range of bilateral tensions—from maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas to frequent

military provocations in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula—stemming from colonial legacies, unresolved conflicts, and rising nationalism.

In response to rising tensions and diverging national interests, the past three years have witnessed the emergence of two distinct strategic alignments in East Asia. On one side stands the United States (US)–Japan–South Korea axis, united by defence treaties and a shared commitment to preserving the existing regional order.⁶ Opposing this is a growing counter-pole formed by China, Russia, and North Korea—a triad that increasingly challenges US influence and signals a profound shift in the region's geopolitical dynamics. This paper examines the strategic foundations, motivations, and implications of the China–Russia–North Korea alignment, and explores how this evolving partnership may reshape the future balance of power in East Asia.

Historical Ties of Triad Members

Russia and China Ties

Since the early 20th century, China and Russia have shared a turbulent relationship marked by both ideological unity and deep mistrust. Initial Soviet support for the Chinese Communist Party⁷ gave way to tensions over unequal treatment, culminating in the 1960 Sino-Soviet split⁸ and violent border clashes in the late 1960s⁹. Relations remained strained until the Soviet collapse in 1991, after which both countries began resetting ties. Over the next two decades, they resolved lingering disputes and steadily upgraded their partnership, culminating in a 'Comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for the new era.'

North Korea's Ties with Russia and China

Since its inception, North Korea has maintained complex yet strategically significant relations with both China and Russia, shaped by Cold War geopolitics and ideological ties. The Soviet Union played a foundational role in establishing the North Korean state, offering extensive military and economic support during the Korean War¹⁰ and formalising a defence treaty in 1961. China's intervention in the same war cemented a parallel alliance, though North Korea's perception of subordination to China contributed to the development of the Juche ideology, emphasising self-reliance.¹¹ The Sino-Soviet split further complicated Pyongyang's position, as it maneuvered between its two patrons to maintain autonomy. Despite growing frictions in the 1970s and 1980s, both ties endured. Following the Soviet collapse, Russia largely withdrew, while China became North Korea's primary economic and diplomatic lifeline amid famine and growing isolation.

Strategic Drivers Behind the Formation of a Triad

Shared Adversaries and External Pressures

The China–Russia–North Korea alignment is a direct response to the growing US–Japan–South Korea trilateral, strengthened by the 2023 Camp David Summit, which

enhanced military coordination and missile data sharing. Improved Japan–South Korea ties enabled this breakthrough, prompting Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang to deepen their strategic cooperation in counterbalance.¹²

Anti-Western Sentiment and Ideological Solidarity

A deep-rooted opposition to the US-led international order serves as a key ideological glue. Russia, increasingly isolated due to its invasion of Ukraine, finds sympathy and support in China and North Korea. China, facing growing Western scrutiny over Taiwan and trade issues, views this partnership as a buffer against containment. North Korea, long ostracised due to its nuclear program, finds in Russia and China valuable diplomatic and economic lifelines.¹³

Converging Interests and Multipolar Goals

Driven by pragmatic interests, China, Russia, and North Korea cooperate to counter US influence and promote a multipolar order. Each benefit—China gains strategic distraction, Russia receives arms and support, and North Korea secures aid and legitimacy—enabling them to pursue national goals while challenging Western dominance.¹⁴

Modes of Cooperation

Military Cooperation

North Korea has supplied Russia with around 20,000 containers of artillery, missiles, and anti-tank weapons¹⁵—fulfilling nearly half of Russia’s wartime ammunition needs—and deployed 11,000 troops to the Kursk front under their 2024 mutual defence pact. In return, Pyongyang has likely received missile and satellite tech^{16 17 18 19}, aiding its recent military advancements. Meanwhile, China has shifted from dual-use to direct-use military support, supplying key manufacturing equipment and components essential to Russia’s defence production²⁰—deepening strategic coordination between Moscow, Pyongyang, and Beijing.

Technology Transfers

North Korea has used military aid to leverage Russian defence technology in return. Kim Jong Un’s tour of defence and aerospace facilities in Vladivostok and Komsomolsk-on-Amur in Sep 2023 marked a turning point in high-tech cooperation. Russian support has likely contributed to North Korea’s May 2024 satellite launch, which used a new kerosene-liquid oxygen engine, likely of Russian origin.²¹ Moreover, Russian aircraft engineers reportedly assisted in upgrading North Korea’s Mig-29 fleet²², and Russia has transferred five attack drones and one reconnaissance UAV²³—enabling reverse-engineering for domestic production of unmanned systems. These collaborations reflect a strategic exchange: arms for advanced technologies.

Diplomatic Support

Russia has increasingly protected North Korea in multilateral forums. In March 2024, it vetoed the renewal of a UN panel that monitored sanctions enforcement against Pyongyang²⁴, effectively dismantling the oversight mechanism. China abstained, signalling cautious alignment. North Korea reciprocated by being one of the only countries—alongside Syria—to recognise Donetsk and Luhansk, and by voting consistently in favour of Russia at the UN. On 12th Jul, in a meeting between Russian foreign minister Lavrov and Kim Jong Un, the latter reiterated unconditional support for all Russian actions in the Russia-Ukraine war.²⁵

Economic Assistance and Industrial Modernisation

China remains North Korea's primary economic lifeline, accounting for 98 per cent of its official trade in 2023 and supplying critical food and energy aid—vital in a country where 40 per cent of the population is undernourished.²⁶ At the same time, military cooperation with Russia has fueled a boom in North Korea's defence economy.

Implications For East Asia and the World

The strengthening China–Russia–North Korea alignment is likely to increase strategic volatility in East Asia. North Korea, energised by military and diplomatic support, may escalate tensions with South Korea. China could intensify its pressure on Taiwan and assert territorial claims in the South and East China Seas. Meanwhile, Russia may sustain aggression in Ukraine and reassert influence in former Soviet states. Collectively, these developments undermine regional stability, weaken deterrence frameworks, and raise the risk of simultaneous security crises.

Globally, the triad is shaping into a loose anti-Western coalition. Through actions such as Russia's UN vetoes and China's abstentions, the group increasingly challenges multilateral institutions and liberal norms. Their shared emphasis on sovereignty and resistance to US influence may appeal to disillusioned states, including Iran, potentially expanding the bloc's geopolitical reach. There is no visible hope of the bloc being formalised, but the convergence of interests suggests a shift toward a more polarised world order. This dynamic points to a transition from post-Cold War multilateralism toward renewed bloc politics and strategic rivalry.

The Way Forward for India

- With multi-alignment at the core of its foreign policy, India must avoid aligning with any single power bloc. This approach will help preserve its strategic autonomy and prevent any compromise of its sovereign decision-making.
- As China continues to see India as a major rival in Asia, it is important for India to strengthen its relationship with Russia. A closer partnership with Moscow—especially in defence and energy—can help India balance China's growing influence. While developing towards self-reliance, staying close to Russia will ensure that China does not fully draw Russia into its camp.

- As China seeks to position itself as the voice of the Global South—often using platforms like BRICS and its alignment with Russia to challenge the Western order—India must actively counter this narrative. While the China–Russia partnership promotes a state-centric, authoritarian model, India can offer a more inclusive and balanced approach rooted in democratic values, development cooperation, and strategic autonomy. By taking a leading role in forums such as BRICS, Indian Ocean Rim Association, and SCO; India can reinforce its image as a responsible and independent leader in the Global South, offering an alternative to China's growing influence and preventing the triad from monopolising regional leadership narratives.

Endnotes

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